

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

## news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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### FEDERAL WILDLIFE CRACKDOWN RESULTS IN SECOND SET OF INDICTMENTS ON ILLEGAL SEA TURTLE IMPORTATIONS

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### AGENTS CONTINUE LARGEST CASE OF ITS TYPE IN UNITED STATES HISTORY

In the largest case in United States history involving the smuggling of sea turtle products, a Federal grand jury in Miami yesterday indicted four men and six corporations for illegally importing 45 tons of meat from endangered sea turtles into this country.

A 13-count indictment charges the defendants with conspiracy, transporting sea turtle meat with fraudulent documents, or importing turtle meat in violation of the Endangered Species Act and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials estimate that about 7,500 endangered Pacific (olive) Ridley sea turtles from Mexico had to be slaughtered to obtain the 89,572 pounds of meat tips, chunks, and filets that were illegally imported into Miami International Airport between January 1978 and June 1979.

The indictments, following an 18-month investigation by government wildlife and customs agents, are part of a larger Federal crackdown by five agencies aimed at curbing the booming illegal trade in endangered species products in the United States.

In addition to the Interior Department's Fish and Wildlife Service, the other agencies participating in the overall effort include the National Marine Fisheries Service in the Department of Commerce, the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service in the Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Customs Service in the Department of the Treasury, and the Department of Justice.

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Yesterday's action in Miami follows the return of a 12-count indictment of two seafood companies and their owners by a Federal grand jury in Brownsville, Texas, on July 29. The related case charges the illegal receipt and sale of over 8 tons of Pacific Ridley meat and names individuals and companies in Brownsville and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, as defendants. About 1,300 Ridley turtles were slaughtered to obtain the meat in this case, the Fish and Wildlife Service has estimated.

In the Miami indictments, two Mexican nationals, Antonio Suarez Gutierrez and Juan Alsina Ramirez, and three Mexican companies, PIOSA (Pesqueria Industrial De Oaxaca, Sociedad Anonima), Meximpex, and Meximtrade, were named. According to the indictments, Suarez owned and operated PIOSA, located in Oaxaca, Mexico, and obtained large quantities of sea turtle meat from the southwestern beaches of Mexico. He later transported the meat to Mexico City, where Alsina, director and chief operating officer of Meximpex and Meximtrade, obtained fraudulent documents used to import the turtle meat into the United States, the indictment charges.

American citizens and companies indicted were Rogelio Alejandro, of Miami, and the company of which he is president, Flanic Trading Company, of Hialeah, Florida; Enrique Ezpeleta, of Miami; Jacmel Enterprises, Inc., of Hialeah; and B & B World Enterprises, Inc., of Miami. Ezpeleta, president and director of Jacmel, is also secretary and director of Flanic, and secretary of B & B World Enterprises.

Except for B & B World Enterprises, all of these individuals and companies were involved in a conspiracy, the indictment charges. According to it, the defendants agreed to use the term "chunked turtle meat -- Dermatemys mawii" on the various customs entry documents accompanying the shipments. Dermatemys mawii is a Mexican freshwater species of turtle whose importation into the United States at present is legal.

It is a violation of the Endangered Species Act to import any type of sea turtle products, including meat, into the United States. This country banned all imports of sea turtle products in 1978. The breeding colonies of the Ridley turtle on the Pacific coast of Mexico and the Gulf of California were listed as endangered in 1978. Elsewhere, the species is listed as threatened.

The adult Pacific Ridley weighs an average of 85 pounds and yields about 12 pounds of meat per animal. The meat, oil, and eggs of this species are in high demand, the prized meat going into the restaurant market and the eggs used in cooking and eaten as a male aphrodisiac. In addition, the hides of the Ridley can be tanned and fashioned into shoes, handbags, and belts.

Collectively, the four species of sea turtle most heavily exploited for illegal trade (green, hawksbill, Atlantic Ridley, and Pacific Ridley) represent the most profitable wild animal on the international market today. Raw tortoise-shell, for example, now exceeds the prices paid for elephant ivory. Over 50 percent of a sea turtle -- meat, shell, skin, and oil -- is marketable in some form.

Criminal violations of the Endangered Species Act carry a maximum fine of \$20,000 and a jail sentence of up to 1 year. Criminal violations of customs law carry a maximum fine of \$10,000 and a jail sentence of up to 5 years.